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ABSTRACT

This publication documents a participatory assessment project conducted from 1993 to 1995 with four afterschool programs in New York City. Key questions were whether the assessment project would develop the capacity of program staff to assess their own projects and whether the programs were successful in supporting the literacy development of the young people they served. Also considered were aspects of the programs positively associated with literacy development and lessons about the effectiveness of participatory assessment. Chapter 1 discusses the conceptual framework of the participatory assessment process and how it was implemented in this study. Chapter 2 describes the philosophical framework underlying the four programs and provides brief project profiles. These programs were characterized by a focus on young people as resources, not problems, and on literacy as involving many different practices fostered by active learning approaches. In chapter 3, critical aspects of the assessment process are described, and chapter 4 presents recommendations for participatory assessment projects and for strengthening afterschool and other youth-serving programs that support literacy among young people. The assessment process was effective in helping programs clarify their objectives and evaluate themselves. It also contributed to an understanding of the factors that make afterschool literacy programs successful, including a philosophy of youth and literacy development and a pedagogy that emphasizes teaching for meaning and active participation of the learner in an environment that is not school-like. (Contains 22 references.) (SLD)

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PARTICIPATORY ASSESSMENT IN AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS

SUMMARY REPORT

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PARTICIPATORY ASSESSMENT IN AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS

SUMMARY REPORT

by

Alexandra Weinbaum

March 1996

AED

Academy for Educational Development

Black children in the cotton fields
Black man in chains
Black women suffering in silence
Watching their men and children in pain.
Our people are tired of being oppressed.
Generations of our people suffered never to rest.
Now our children are dying and mothers are crying.
In the face of violence we can't keep our silence.
When will we get to rest?

(Written by participant of the Challenge Program, Interfaith Neighbors)

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Introduction

This publication documents a participatory assessment project, conducted from 1993 to 1995 with four afterschool programs in New York City. The project grew out of a 1991-92 initiative funded by the New York City Department of Youth Services in which the Academy for Educational Development (AED), a nonprofit educational evaluation and technical assistance organization, with offices in Washington, D. C. and New York City, provided technical assistance to youth-serving agencies. The main goal of this technical assistance was to increase program staff's capacity to assess their programs for purposes of planning, program improvement, and communication with key constituencies—parents, community and board members, and funders. AED learned a great deal from the project about the power of a participatory assessment project to promote learning within organizations and to build the capacity of program directors and key staff in youth-serving agencies to become more reflective about programming and its impact on young people.

In 1993 the Robert Bowne and Charles Hayden foundations joined the Department of Youth Services in funding a project that would draw on what had been learned in the earlier initiative but focus exclusively on afterschool programs that incorporated innovative approaches to literacy development. The goal of this project was to conduct assessments of each program in collaboration with key staff in order to answer the questions presented below.

We address these questions throughout this report, which is organized as follows:

- Chapter one discusses the conceptual framework of the participatory assessment process, its objectives, how it differs from other types of participatory research, and how it was implemented in this project; it also describes project activities and summarizes the lessons learned from the project.
- Chapter two describes the philosophical framework underlying the four participating programs and provides brief project profiles.
- Chapter three discusses critical aspects of the assessment process; findings about program effectiveness in promoting the literacy development of participants; and lessons learned about the benefits to programs of participating in the assessment.
- Chapter four presents recommendations for participatory assessment projects and for strengthening afterschool and other youth-serving programs to support literacy among young people.

KEY ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

- Would the assessment project develop the capacity of program directors and key staff to assess their own programs? How would they use what they learned from the project in future planning and program development?
- How successful are the programs currently in supporting the literacy development of the young people whom they serve?
- Which aspects of the programs are positively associated with the literacy development of participants?
- What lessons could be learned about the effectiveness of participatory assessment in building staff capacity for internal assessment and reflection that could be applied more broadly to bring about improvement in afterschool programming?

Chapter One
Conceptual Framework and Project Activities

Conceptual Framework

In conceptualizing this project, AED was guided by a need expressed in discussions with program staff from youth-serving agencies around the country. Although they felt that they played a vital and positive role in supporting the development of young people, program staff had little systematic data to prove this. In a decade of increasing demands for public accountability for dollars spent on services to youth and of decreasing funding for youth programming, program staff felt a great deal of pressure to demonstrate their effectiveness to the general public and funders. In addition, as reflective practitioners, they wanted to know how well they were carrying out what they intended to do; how they could strengthen their programs; and how they could communicate their "successes" more effectively to community members, boards, and funders.

With these considerations in mind, AED developed a project that would involve key program staff in assessing their own programs and would leave them with analytic tools and documentation instruments for ongoing reflection and assessment. With foundation support, AED also planned to conduct an assessment of participating afterschool programs that would be technically rigorous and would yield useful information to programs and funders and others interested in understanding the impact of programs on young people's development, especially their literacy development. In order to accomplish these objectives, the project had four components, summarized in the next box.

Participatory assessment seeks to "maximize the usefulness of the evaluation data for intended users" (Cousins, 1995). In this respect, participatory assessment differs from other participatory approaches to research, which have as their main goal the redefining of power relationships or addressing social inequities through the participation of traditionally underrepresented members of a community—for example parents in schools—in research projects on issues affecting their lives

ASSESSMENT PROJECT COMPONENTS

- **Identifying programs with the staff capacity** and commitment to participate in a two-year, labor-intensive project and the organizational support to do so, including a commitment to use the assessment results to guide program planning and development
- **Training key staff** in assessment approaches and methods
- **Providing technical assistance** to the programs in developing assessment questions and an assessment design for carrying this out
- **Analyzing/reviewing findings** and reports or any published materials about the project

(Weiss, 1992). While these goals may be aspects of the participatory assessment process described here—and we will return to them in the discussion of the assessment process in each program—the essential goal of participatory assessment, as we use the term, is to be of use to program staff in their ongoing work and future planning, as well as to help them be accountable to their communities, boards, and funders. Unlike stakeholder models of assessment in which large numbers of stakeholders are involved in the development of research questions and in the review of findings, the model of participatory research used in this project limited the number of stakeholders to two or three per program (usually a program director and a senior staff person or, in some cases, an agency director and program area director) who were likely to use the assessment approaches and findings. In contrast to stakeholder research, the participatory model requires program staff to acquire some of the technical skills of evaluation as well as to participate intensively in data collection and analysis—that is, the participants and evaluators mutually determine and control all phases of the assessment. For this to happen, participants must devote a considerable amount of time both to learning evaluation approaches and strategies and to carrying out evaluation activities in their programs (Cousins, Earl 1992). The table on the next page summarizes these three approaches to assessment.

There were many unexpected outcomes of the assessment process, but perhaps the most notable one, and one that changed the character of the project, was the amount of networking and mutual support that occurred among participating programs. Originally designed to assist each program in carrying out its own assessment, the project in fact helped each program understand other afterschool programs in some depth; develop sufficient trust among themselves to discuss difficult issues of programming; and share both assessment and program strategies. Sharing of assessment instruments and program ideas became common practice soon after the project began. Developing this community of reflective practitioners across programs was one of the unexpected and most important outcomes of the project. We will return to this aspect in the discussion of the project's impact on the programs in chapter three.

Project Activities

The rest of this chapter describes each of the four components of the project. 1) identifying programs for participation; 2) training key staff in assessment approaches and strategies; 3) providing technical assistance to programs; and 4) analyzing/reviewing findings and all published materials on the project. The lessons learned from the project are summarized at the end of the chapter.

APPROACHES TO ASSESSMENT

Types of Assessment	Key Participants	Roles in Assessment	Desired Outcomes
Participatory assessment	Staff in leadership positions Other staff/parents and participants Technical assistance/ evaluation experts	Participation in all aspects Discussion of methods and findings	Staff, especially in leadership positions learn to assess outcomes of their programs and to use outcomes in planning, program improvement, communication
Participatory action research	Underrepresented groups such as parents, adult literacy students Technical assistance/ evaluation experts	Participation in all aspects of research	Represent multiple, formerly underrepresented voices in assessment of social change projects in order to bring about improvements in their lives
Stakeholders evaluation	Key stakeholders in large projects Technical assistance/ evaluation experts	Participate in defining evaluation questions and reviewing findings All aspects of evaluation	Develop ownership of key stakeholders in the evaluation and its results

1. Identifying programs for participation

Not all programs are prepared to engage in participatory assessment. Having already conducted one pilot project with other youth-serving agencies in the city, AED was aware of some of the preconditions for successful participation in such a project and had already developed a selection process to ensure that participating programs were prepared for the work and would be able to use the results. The process developed for this project entailed developing a Request for Proposals to be sent to selected afterschool programs that received funding from the New York City Department of Youth Services and The Bowne and Hayden foundations. Following this, AED held a bidders' meeting in which staff outlined project goals and invited programs to discuss the types of questions they were interested in pursuing in the project. In listening to program staff discuss questions of interest to them, AED staff were able to develop a preliminary understanding of the types of issues and concerns that program staff attending the meeting considered important. Following the bidders' conference, programs submitted their proposals; these included a description of their organization's mission and participants; the questions they hoped to pursue in the project; how they proposed to use the findings; and which staff would commit their time to the project. Based on a review of the proposals, AED selected six programs for interviews in which these issues were discussed further; four of these were selected for the assessment project.

The four major criteria that AED used in making the final decision about which programs would participate in the assessment project are listed in the next box.

CRITERIA FOR PARTICIPATION IN THE ASSESSMENT PROJECT

- The **commitment of staff** to participate in all phases of the two-year project
- The **participation of staff in leadership positions** in which they could use what they learned in the project in staff development and to improve their programs
- **Sufficient organizational stability** so that staff could participate in a two-year project, carry out evaluation tasks in addition to their normal work load, and share their learning with others
- **Already existing organizational support**, as well as structures for staff development and inquiry into program effectiveness, which could be used to discuss the assessment activities and findings

2. Training key staff in assessment approaches and strategies

The approach to participatory assessment in this project is based on a sharing of technical knowledge among participants. In order to foster this sharing, AED developed a series of ten two-hour workshops that all participating program staff were required to attend. The workshops were divided into four parts. In the first, AED focused on helping programs develop an understanding of different types of evaluations and their uses. In the second, program staff reviewed their program goals and objectives and asked hard questions about how they had been developed and whether or not program activities supported the attainment of these goals and objectives. Part three focused on providing program staff with hands-on opportunities to learn about selected evaluation strategies, and part four focused on assisting program staff to develop the assessment questions and an evaluation design.

The most challenging part of the workshop series was the aspect that we at first expected would be the easiest—defining program objectives. In many ways, the agencies had limited the description of their programs' goals and objectives to meet the criteria and expectations set by funders and to some extent their constituencies. For example, they were accustomed to reporting *what* they did, not *why* they did it. That is, as service organizations, they often framed their objectives around the provision of services rather than around what they hoped to accomplish through service provision. As we encouraged programs to define their objectives, a further complication became apparent: the various program constituencies held somewhat different views of program objectives from those held by

program leaders or board members. For example, although one of the programs provided very innovative interdisciplinary, project-based approaches in an effort to help students develop and improve their literacy skills, the parents—many of whom were recent immigrants—were most interested in the assistance the program could provide in helping their children complete their homework.

The discussions about objectives led some programs to realize that what they had defined as objectives were often broad social goals—for example, empowering young people to participate more fully in their communities. The challenge AED posed to program staff was to be precise about the skills, knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors they wanted young people to develop in their programs in order to accomplish these broad social goals. We encouraged staff to think about how they could determine whether or not they were accomplishing their objectives and whether they and their program activities supported young people in developing these skills, knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Much of the learning about assessment and the conceptual framework needed to carry out assessments emerged from the discussion of program objectives.

The workshops series presented materials on the various strategies used in assessment—observation, interviews, focus groups, and surveys. In addition, AED staff discussed and developed forms to document which young people the program served and the types and intensity of services. All the workshops were participatory: program staff had opportunities to learn about assessment strategies, review assessment instruments, and develop and test their own instruments. For example, following a discussion of surveys, participants reviewed and critiqued various types of surveys used in assessment and, as a group, designed their own parent survey. Several programs pilot-tested the survey with a group of parents and reported the results at a subsequent workshop. Further refinements were then made in the original survey instruments based on the results of the pilot.

The final phase of the workshop series involved the development of an assessment plan that specified the questions each program wanted to address; a description of the methods staff would use to answer the questions and what staff would carry out the assessment activities; and what products staff wished to have from the evaluation—for example, forms to be used for internal program documentation and data to report to their boards or funders.

An additional task of the project was for program staff to present their assessment questions and designs to other afterschool programs in the city. This was carried out in a four-hour workshop, the main objectives of which were to help participating programs clarify their designs enough to present them to external audiences and to inform other programs about the project; provide other programs with instruments they could use immediately to document their program activities and outcomes; and convince other programs that the process was useful and achievable, and to interest them in participating in a similar assessment process.

3. Providing technical assistance to programs

Programs would not have been able to develop an assessment design or carry out the activities without a great deal of technical assistance from AED staff. As one staff member put it, "It was like pushing a stick through molasses; I was just not used to thinking this way." Interesting insights into assessment emerged from contrasting how program professionals and assessment professionals think. Program staff have been trained in their professions—as teachers and social workers or youth workers—and think programmatically: What are the needs of young people? How does my professional knowledge help me to meet them? How can I meet them within the constraints of my budget, agency, and staff capacity? AED asked staff to think about other issues: What are the conceptual underpinnings of the program? On what theory or theories is it based? Are these underpinnings consistent or contradictory? How are they reflected in the program objectives, activities, and organizational structure? How do the staff and other constituents, such as parents, conceptualize the program objectives? How do staff, students, and parents determine program effectiveness? How do staff know how effective they

are with young people? How can staff document change over time? How can they use what they find out to change or modify their program and present the findings to others?

The technical assistance provided was also very practical in nature. AED staff helped programs develop new intake forms to obtain the information they needed about participants and to develop instruments for measuring program outcomes. In addition, we modeled some evaluation strategies that program staff wished to use. For example, we modelled a classroom observation, helping participants address relevant questions: In the welter of impressions from a classroom, what do you write down and why? What is the nature of interactions between teachers and students and students and students in the classroom? How do you summarize and analyze your notes? In addition, we helped pilot-test instruments—surveys of young people and their parents—and analyzed the results with staff. AED also carried out some activities—for example, focus groups with students touching on sensitive issues that might be critical of the program design or individual staff members—that program staff felt would be more effectively carried out by staff from an outside organization. Finally, we talked about products—charts, quotes, "success stories"—that could be presented to various audiences regarding program accomplishments.

AED collaborated in conducting the assessment itself. Our tasks were two-fold: collecting school data for all students and developing a case study of each program. These tasks are described below.

ASSESSMENT TASKS

Collecting School Data for All Students

Goal: To document the impact of the programs on school achievement.

Method: AED collected data from program staff who had obtained some of it during the intake process. Program staff also obtained this information from the schools and individual teachers.

Developing a Case Study of Each Program

Goal: To develop a case study of each program that would provide a rich contextual description of that program's approaches and activities; the staff's backgrounds and perceptions of their roles and responsibilities; parent perceptions of the program's value for their child; and young people's perceptions of program strengths and weaknesses.

Method: Week-long observations, interviews, and focus groups; selected observations throughout a year

4. Analyzing/reviewing findings and reports

As data were collected, AED met with program staff to analyze the findings. In the case of surveys, AED developed the analysis plan and entered and analyzed the data. We discussed the significance of findings with staff and, in the case of pilot surveys, refined the instruments so that they would yield more useful data. For example, a parent survey that asked parents how their child might act in various situations in the program was difficult for parents to answer. They preferred open-ended questions in which they could reflect on their child's behavior at home. As a result, the parent survey was considerably revised to combine open- and close-ended questions. The case studies of each program, which AED developed, were sent to the programs for review, and in a meeting of all program staff, there was a discussion of the final report for the project. Each program commented on the case-study's accuracy in reflecting the program and its accomplishments, as well as on the impact of the project on the program. Program staff also made recommendations about the content of this publication—that is, which aspects of the project were most important to highlight for other audiences.

The phases of the assessment, for both AED and programs are illustrated in the box below.

PHASES OF THE ASSESSMENT

AED	Programs
Phase I • Present hands-on workshops (10 weeks) • Facilitate plan design • Record and analyze the development process *Phase II* • Assist with assessment • Conduct some assessment tasks • Assist with or conduct analyses and summarize results • Summarize (each) program's experience in phases I and II, including results of their assessments, in four case studies about the participating programs • Produce a final report • Incorporate programs' changes and suggestions	*Phase I* • Learn evaluation strategies and thinking • Define goals and objectives • Develop assessment plan • Present plan to other programs *Phase II* • Conduct the planned assessment • Discuss methods and results with other staff and parents • Review on AED final report

Lessons Learned from Assessment Project

1. For participating program staff, the experience of carrying out an assessment of their programs was difficult and also powerful. Carrying out the assessment was difficult because it was extremely time consuming, it demanded new ways of thinking, and the results were sometimes difficult to take—evidence of program weaknesses or staff criticisms were disturbing. As one staff member said, "Others should not take on this project unless they are prepared to hear and act on the findings." However, because staff believed the assessments were valid, the information provided was used to guide change and strengthen the programs. In addition, staff felt empowered by the experience because it gave them a new way to look at their programs. Indeed, as described above, thinking as an evaluator involves a paradigm shift for program staff: it involves moving back from their programs and observing them—ultimately a powerful experience since it provided new tools of analysis, new ways to look at what they were doing, and new ways to approach program development.

2. The project is very labor intensive for everyone involved. The project took much more time than originally anticipated or budgeted. In addition, some programs suffered cutbacks in funding during the project, and staff in these programs had less time to spend on the project and had to eliminate some aspects of their assessment design. One program director noted that only full-time staff could participate since part-time staff were not paid for extra meetings or other types of activities. Further, there were some gaps in communication between AED and program staff during the final stages of data analysis and writing of the final report because of the pressure of deadlines.

3. Organizational support for participation in such a project is essential. In all cases, the agency fully supported the participation of the staff in the project (in two cases the directors of the agency participated). Such a level of organizational support is probably unusual, particularly in large agencies, but essential for sustaining work in the project over time, for communicating with the rest of the staff, and for applying the findings to program planning and improvement.

4. Having an external, trained evaluation team is essential to the success of a participatory assessment project. In this project, the team provided external validation of assessment designs, data management review, and the technical capacity to enter and analyze data. Working closely with an assessment team helped to demystify the process and build the capacity of the programs to broker services from evaluators in the future.

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* We use the term "assessment" because of its recent association with approaches to student assessment emphasizing the relationship between assessment and instruction and hence its formative character for teachers and students; the participation of students in their own assessment; and the goal of having students become proficient in determining the strengths and weaknesses of their own performance through discussion with teachers, peers and other reviewers of their work. All these aspects of assessment were important in the project described in this report.

Chapter Two
Program Philosophy and Profiles

Program Philosophy

This chapter discusses the philosophy that guided the development of the four afterschool programs. Because this project focused on programs known for innovative approaches to literacy development, it was important to understand their perspectives on literacy and youth development. AED developed this understanding throughout workshops and through the interviews and observations that we conducted for the case studies. These perspectives were very similar and led to similar types of activities in spite of such obvious differences as the size of the sponsoring agencies, the young people whom they targeted, their program operation (especially schedules), and staff backgrounds and staff/ participant ratios. The discussion of program perspectives on literacy and youth development is followed by a brief description of the four programs illustrating how they applied these philosophical perspectives in their programming.

The following three perspectives on youth development and literacy characterized all the programs in the project:

1. A perspective on young people that views them as resources and not as problems in need of "fixing." Each program targeted students from among the poorest communities in the city—communities characterized by high poverty and unemployment rates and other indicators of poverty, including high rates of teen parenthood and infant mortality. In the two programs for which data were available, 38 and 88 percent of the participants were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Two programs specifically targeted young people who were behind in school as measured by their scores on standardized tests in reading and mathematics. Many program participants were in special education or bilingual programs. Two programs did not specifically target students with academic difficulties; nevertheless, 48 and 44 percent of their participants were below grade level in reading, and 56 percent and 33 percent were below grade level in math.

In spite of the fact that each program recruited students commonly labeled as students with academic deficits in need of remediation, program staff adopted a different perspective on the young people in their programs. They believed—and young people's stories confirmed their view—that many young people had difficulty in school because teachers were not able to develop relationships with them that allowed them to learn at their own speed and in their own fashion. One director said of his participants that they had learned early on that the best way to get by in school was to go unnoticed. Many of his students barely expressed themselves at all when they first entered the program, preferring invisibility to the possible ridicule of peers. In other programs, many participants also had histories of poor achievement and others of withdrawn or acting-out behavior in school.

All the programs believed that all young people —whatever their academic performance—have voices, feelings, and opinions waiting to be tapped and articulated, and defined their major task as helping young people tap their dreams, articulate their thoughts, and imagine their futures. An essential aspect of strengthening young people's potential in each program included providing them with opportunities to understand their social realities and to identify and celebrate the strengths of their families and the communities to which they looked for inspiration, role models, and guidance. This aspect also included providing young people with a voice in deciding the content and direction of the program. Such perspectives are grounded in recent research in what makes youth programs effective. Of critical importance is the perspective on young people as resources to be developed rather than as problems in need of fixing (Cahill and Pittman, 1992; McLaughlin, et al, 1994).

2. A perspective on literacy that emphasizes the many types of literacy practices and purposes and the need for developing supportive communities in which to develop literacy skills. All the programs viewed literacy as involving many different practices, such as completing a worksheet in a class; assisting

a non-English speaking parent to buy food or negotiate a social service agency; and listening to, understanding, and retelling a story told by a beloved grandmother. In other words, programs viewed literacy as practices entailing many different types of skills used in different settings—families, schools, communities and institutional settings—for many different purposes. School literacy skills are among the many that young people may practice.

Sylvia Scribner has described literacy practices and purposes using three metaphors: "literacy as adaptation," "literacy as power," and "literacy as a state of grace" (Scribner, 1988). The first metaphor, literacy as adaptation, describes literacy in everyday usage—reading directions or filling out forms. The second metaphor, literacy as power, points to the power differences between those who are the most and least competent in the literacy practices that are valued in a given society and that are signs of and reinforce the distance between social groups. According to the Brazilian educator Paolo Freire, the most important task of literacy development among poor people is its use in social transformation. As people learn to name the social realities around them by reading and writing, they also acquire the tools to change them. The third metaphor, literacy as a state of grace, refers to literacy acquired for personal edification and satisfaction through an individual partaking of the intellectual, artistic, and spiritual legacy of all cultures and the status conferred on those who acquire this type of literacy. In the programs in this project, all these forms of literacy were deemed important: the literacy necessary for living in today's society, the literacy required to name and change one's social realities, and the literacy needed to become knowledgeable about and to enjoy the world's artistic, philosophic, and spiritual traditions.

Participating programs emphasized the relational/social aspects of literacy as particularly important. In this view, literacy practices occur in social settings as part of the process of communicating with others—in a church when the Bible is being read, at home when notes are left for family members, in school when instructions for an in-class experiment are read by a group of students—to name but a few settings. A thread running through all the programs was attention focused on developing communities among adults and children characterized by trust, support and respect—something that many participants lacked in their school settings—in which literacy practices could flourish.

> *You need to have a reason to read and write. Being part of a community in which what you read and write is shared and valued is one of the main reasons for developing literacy skills. We begin in our program by developing a sense of community.*
>
> [Director of afterschool program participating in assessment project]
>
> *In the program young people have to open themselves up to varying points of view. Students are not passive here. They are more competent in espousing their likes and dislikes about things. They feel involved enough to make a decision.*
>
> [Staff person in afterschool program participating in assessment project]
>
> *We want our participants to see themselves as individuals who take action, rather than as individuals who have things done to them.*
>
> [Staff person in afterschool program participating in assessment project]

3. A perspective on teaching and learning that emphasizes active learning approaches within the program as important contributors to young people's development and ability to become better readers, writers, problem solvers, and thinkers. In contrast to many traditional classrooms, where there is little choice about what is learned, in which rote learning rather than understanding is emphasized, and in which skills are often taught for their own sake rather than in the context of meaningful activities or content, all participating programs were committed to the following practices:

- Giving young people choices about what they learned and about the activities they participated in so that they could choose topics and issues of importance and meaning to them
- Teaching skills—such as spelling or punctuation—through meaningful and engaging projects and activities
- Helping young people make meaning out of their lives through literacy activities—for example, writing activities that helped them identify what they valued, learn about their backgrounds, clarify their goals, and name and reflect on such social realities in their lives as violence in their communities or difficulties dealing with peers in school

There is a growing body of research that supports the effectiveness of instruction that encourages active learning. Through active learning, students participate in the construction of meaning—also referred to as a "constructivist" approach to learning. Recent research on active/constructivist instruction has demonstrated its effectiveness in developing higher level thinking skills and overall academic achievement. A study for the U.S. Department of Education, conducted in 140 classrooms in 15 elementary schools across the country with high concentrations of low-income students, found that in those classrooms in which teaching focused on

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"meaning and understanding," including teaching skills in meaningful contexts (that is, never apart from engaging and relevant content) and teaching for comprehension and meaning, students performed better on tests of advanced skills than in classrooms without such instructional practices; this was true even when taking into account initial differences in achievement and poverty level (Knapp, Shields, Turnbull, 1992). Additional support for active instructional approaches supporting the construction of knowledge comes from cognitive psychologists, who emphasize the importance of school learning that mimics how people learn in real-life settings, including workplaces (Resnick, 1987). Others have demonstrated positive achievement results when teachers carefully scaffold learning experiences to assist students in making meaning out of texts. Their ideas of scaffolding are drawn from the workplace—the process by which expert workers teach novices complex new skills (Collins, Brown et al., 1991).

The following program profiles provide evidence of the ways in which the programs in this project put these ideas about literacy and active learning into practice.

The Friendly Place/El Sitio Simpatico
Afterschool Program

The Agency: The Friendly Place/El Sitio Simpatico—was a community center located in East Harlem New York,* a community composed primarily of African-American and Latino/a residents, with many of the latter Spanish-speaking immigrants. The heart of Friendly Place was its library, which opened to the street with floor-to-ceiling windows that invited passersby to look in; its entrance door had posters of famous people of diverse backgrounds with messages fostering literacy. The book-lined shelves were arranged by topic and included multicultural books and books in Spanish and English. The center targeted its services to local residents—primarily from nearby housing projects—who were encouraged to borrow books and send their children to the afterschool program.

The Program: The afterschool program targeted children in grades 2-6. During the 1995-96 program year, 39 students were enrolled—almost evenly split between children of African-American and Latino/a backgrounds. Staff indicated that many children entered the program behind in their reading and other academic skills. Staff consisted of an education director and two full-time and one part-time employee who worked with students in groups of approximately 12. During the assessment project, the program's funding was cut, and the program lost one of its full-time staff members. The program director assumed the responsibility of a group leader to replace this person.

According to the center brochure, the mission of the afterschool program was to:

> Improve the literacy and critical thinking skills of young people by providing a safe and nurturing environment built on mutual trust and respect among participants and adults. . . . We want children to have fun while they learn and develop a sense of ownership of the program and the work they do here. We use a whole-language approach, believing we must address the whole child, including his/her home, school and community life.

Program Vignette: Students spent five days a week at center from 3-5:30 p.m. A typical schedule for the day included a group meeting, snack time, homework time, book sharing, and theme unit or choice time. During homework, students worked together with their group leader; if a child did not have homework that day, an "I ain't got no homework" folder suggested writing or other activities that he/she might pursue instead; all work was kept in a folder. Following homework, students frequently read a book from the center's large collection. In this they were encouraged to pair with another participant and to write to this person when they had finished a book, describing it and saying whether they recommended it and why. Other activities in this time period included a theme that the group leaders pursued for a month: African-American culture or women in science were themes pursued during the year of the assessment project. Sometimes, the staff identified areas that students needed help in from observing them doing their homework and devoted this period of time to mini-lessons in these areas.

continued

* This program stopped operation shortly after the project ended because of loss of funding.

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The Friendly Place/El Sitio Simpatico
Afterschool Program
(continued)

Other days were "choice" days in which students chose from a wide variety of games, crafts, cooking, or other planned activities. The approach to literacy embraced both whole-language and direct-skill instruction through the mini-lessons and homework assistance. In reading and writing, students were assisted in developing their literacy skills through reading and discussing books that they chose and often shared with others. Staff in the center were very dedicated to their work and community. Of the many things that children liked about the center, the staff was most important; students said they felt cared for and loved. Parents also valued the program for its proximity, safety and, above all, its caring staff.

No. Staff	No. Students	Staff:Student Ratio
3	39	1:13

Schedule	Structure	Activities
3-5:30 p.m. (Monday-Friday)	Program Coordinator Two staff people	Meeting time (3-3:15 p.m.) Snack time (3:25-3:35 p.m.) Homework time (3:45-4:30 p.m.) Book sharing--theme, choice, mini-lesson, free day (4:35-5:15 p.m.) Clean-up time (5:15-5:30 p.m.) Dismissal (5:30 p.m.)

Interfaith Neighbors
The Challenge Program

The Agency: Interfaith Neighbors is located on the Upper East Side of New York. It occupies one floor of New York's Psychoanalytic Institute, where the agency has offered a range of programs to young adolescents aged 10 to 13 since 1954. The programs are designed to help young people stay in school, understand and confront the complex and difficult social realities they face, minimize high-risk behavior, and maximize their learning, social competence, and healthy development. It targets young people from many public and private schools—some local and others in the Bronx, Brooklyn and Queens. Annually, the agency serves approximately 400 young people on site and 1100 in schools.

The Program: During 1994-95, The Challenge Program, which participated in the assessment project, served 28 adolescents, ranging in age from 11 to 13, three afternoons a week. They were seventh graders from nine public and private schools: 52 percent were African Americans, 32 percent were Latino/as, and the rest were white or of other backgrounds, and 38 percent of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. The program has a strong youth development perspective and uses reading and writing to help young people learn about themselves and others, to find their voices, and express their opinions. Through the various program activities, young people explore their personal histories; develop a sense of their personal and cultural identity; strengthen reading and writing skills; and develop social and personal skills to assist them in navigating specific developmental issues and concerns. The literacy approach integrates a whole-language approach to reading and writing with general adolescent developmental theory and group work. Staff are primarily experienced social workers or interns with social work backgrounds. Five staff work with the Challenge Program in various capacities and meet regularly to plan the program and discuss the needs of participants. Staff are dedicated to the young people, calling them at home if necessary and seeing them in their schools if there is a special need. Much attention is paid in the program to developing students' leadership and decision-making skills and their understanding of group norms and processes, and to providing them with barometers to assess and monitor their own behavior.

Program Vignette: The Interfaith "Writing Bill of Rights" is posted on a wall of the agency: *Your writing will not be graded or marked with a red pen; You have a right to an audience for your writing if you want one; You have the right to as much time as you need to finish a piece of writing; You have a right not to be made fun of.* These principles are put into practice in a variety of group activities that take place during the three program days. In addition to group meetings designed to support ownership of the program through sharing in planning and decision making, young people participate in a curriculum called Path, which explores issues of personal, social and cultural identity through reading and writing. On one day, students listened to music of different cultures and, working in small groups, brainstormed images evoked by the music. These images included slavery, tribes fighting, praying, Caribbean festival, and walking through the rain forest. Then groups wrote poems using these images. The poetry written in Path sessions is often displayed on agency walls, and students can present their work, if they choose, to their peers. The poem written by one group is presented at the beginning of this report.

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Interfaith Neighbors
The Challenge Program
(continued)

Other weekly activities include journal writing, in which students record events of the week and their feelings about them, and their case worker writes back to them; and Rap Group, in which boys and girls meet separately to discuss topics of concern to young adolescents—relationships, drugs, anger, stress, self-perceptions, transition issues, sexuality and so forth. Rap time is a favorite of young people in the program.

Young people also attend case-management sessions with their counselor twice a month or more, depending upon individual needs. Staff described Interfaith as an agency that provides "a safe place to deal with conflict" and to learn to respect differences. Parents play an important role in the Challenge Program—from learning about the program goals and objectives in the intake process, to attending meetings, potluck suppers and workshops designed specifically for them. In addition, a counselor calls each parent twice a month to talk about his/her child.

No. Staff	No. Students	Staff:Student Ratio
5	28	1:6

Schedule	Structure	Activities
3-5 p.m.* 3 days a week (Monday, Wednesday, and Friday)	Program Director Director of counseling services Family/school liaison worker 2 social work interns	Snack and relax time (3-3:30 p.m.) Unit meeting (3:30-3:45 p.m.) Activity (path curriculum, journal writing, rap groups; 3:45-5 p.m.) Library time (once a month) Case management (twice a month or more as needed)

* On some days students may come before 3 p.m. and stay after 5 p.m. for case management.

Pius XII /North Bronx Family Center
Afterschool Tutoring Program

The Agency: Pius XII/North Bronx Family Center is a multifaceted service agency located in the University Heights section of the Bronx. It offers a range of educational, recreational and support services and activities to a predominantly African-American and Latino/a population. Located in a three-story house that once served as a dormitory of New York University, the property is now leased to the agency by Bronx Community College, its current owner.

The Program: The program that participated in the assessment project is the afterschool tutoring program. During the year of the project, the program served 84 students—40 percent of whom were African American and 60 percent of whom were Latino/a. The program operates four days a week; students attend the program for two and a quarter hours once a week. Each day students are divided by age into three groups—7-9, 9-11, and 11-13. Students are referred to the program by their schools because they are behind in school; many students also attend other programs in the agency on days when they are not in the afterschool tutoring program. On any given day, there are likely to be about 15 students attending, with about five in each group. The program is staffed by an education director and three group leaders who are students at Bronx Community College in human services. They are assisted by student interns, also from the college. The director closely supervises the program, providing the group leaders and interns with opportunities to develop their literacy skills as they learn how to be effective group leaders. Students in this program are often very disaffected learners. Therefore, a major goal of the program is to reengage them in learning and help them become active learners. The premise behind program activities is that students must feel valued members of a community before they will be willing to speak out and share their views and feelings. The program is activity-based and seeks to teach literacy skills through engaging students in community-building activities that encourage them to express themselves in writing and to seek answers to questions that are important and relevant to their lives.

Program Vignette: On a typical day, one group of students might be learning math concepts through using play money; another group might be involved in silent reading followed by a discussion of what they have been reading; a third group might be working on a group project based on a theme that has been selected to focus reading and inquiry. During the year of the assessment project, the thematic unit was What Survives in the Bronx—a theme chosen to help students develop a positive sense of their community by exploring its ecological and social environment. The director chose the theme because students had little knowledge or experience of their communities and particularly of the natural environment (students debated one day whether or not there were pigeons in the Bronx). Students studied worms, wasps, butterflies, coyotes (which had recently been identified in the Bronx), plants, and trees; they took walks in their neighborhoods and created maps; and they learned about trees and also explored their own roots. When cutbacks occurred in funding for their program, they talked about them in terms of their own survival and wrote letters to the mayor protesting the cuts.

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Pius XII /North Bronx Family Center
Afterschool Tutoring Program
(continued)

Typical of this program was the culminating activity of the ecology unit. Students planned and organized a museum on What Survives in the Bronx: student work was mounted on the walls, including the neighborhood map; posters illustrating how worms and humans differ; and pictures of insects and animals, such as cockroaches and coyotes, that survive in the Bronx. Each room had a different focus. In the worm room, students and staff performed a worm puppet show, illustrating the usefulness of worms; in the butterfly room, visitors were given materials to make their own butterflies; and in the wasp room, visitors learned about the paper-like substance out of which wasps build their nests, and students conducted a paper-making demonstration and made bookmarks. Throughout this event, students impressed visitors with their knowledge and understanding of the issues and their readings and ability to answer questions. This activity is an excellent example of the linkage made in this program between building a sense of community and the development of literacy skills in young people.

No. Staff	No. Students	Staff:Student Ratio
4 + tutors	84 Daily: 15-20	1:3

Schedule	Structure	Activities
3-5:45 p.m. One day a week*	Education Director Three group leaders Tutors Three groups of students (7-9, 9-11, 11-13)	Tutoring, writing, library, remedial work (3:30-4:30 p.m.) Hands-on activity based on the instructional theme (4:30-5:45 p.m.)

* Program runs Monday through Thursday but different sets of students are seen on each day.

Project Reach Youth (PRY)
Family Learning Center

The Agency: Project Reach Youth (PRY) is a community-based organization serving the needs of young children and adolescents residing in or attending schools in the Brooklyn communities of Park Slope, Sunset Park and Red Hook. Located on the outskirts of Park Slope, the agency serves over 3000 youth a year between the ages of 3 and 19. The majority are from low-income families.

The Program: For the assessment project, we focused on PRY's Family Learning Center, which provides afterschool programs in five schools serving 150 students a year. We focused on two elementary schools with a total afterschool enrollment of 105: 70 percent of the students were Latino/a, 17 percent African American, and the rest of other backgrounds. Most students were in grades 1-4 and were referred to the program because they were one grade or more behind in core academic subjects; 88 percent of students were receiving free or reduced-price lunch. Students participating in each program attend the school in which it is located. Programs are supervised by teachers who also teach in the program. One of the supervisors is also a teacher in the school where the program takes place. Both supervisors are responsible for being a liaison with the school staff—the principal, guidance counselors, teachers—and with parents. Supervisors also develop the activity-based program, which, according to the program literature, seeks "to integrate real-life situations into learning, reading, writing and math."

Program Vignette: On any given day, students can be found first doing their homework in small groups or individually for 45 minutes. Following this, students have a wide choice of activities that often involve reading and writing around a theme, carrying out projects related to the theme, or participating in a cultural event or trip. During the assessment project, the theme was city life. On one day, students were divided into groups and assigned the task of drawing a scene of city life. Each scene was cut out and mounted on paper with the other scenes to create a collage of the students' images of city life. Before mounting the scenes, each group presented theirs to the class, and each group member read a poem he/she had written earlier in the week about living in the city. Every student participated and was encouraged by other students and the teacher to present his/her work. The project, which is typical of the activities at PRY, offered multiple opportunities to learn and demonstrate learning. It emphasized group work and also was successfully completed in a limited time period, leaving students and teachers with a feeling of success and accomplishment. Recreation and games are also part of the Family Learning Center program; there are often group competitions with a focus on developing students' academic skills; cultural events such as story-telling from many cultures are also offered. Group norms are consistently upheld by teachers who call attention to remarks or comments that could hurt children's feelings; they discuss the kind of respect that is needed for the program to work for everyone. Parents in the community, many of whom do not speak English, are happy that their children are receiving this kind of academic help and also that, as one parent put it, "The program also teaches morals. . . how to speak to people, how to be polite."

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	No. Staff	No. Students	Staff:Student Ratio
PS 10	4	60	1:15
PS 124	3 teachers; 3+ tutors (at least one for each class)	45	1:15

Schedule	Structure	Activities***
3-5:15 p.m. Two days a week*	Two schools* PS 10** Four classes (1-2, 3, 4, 5-6) PS 124 Three classes (1-2, 3-4, 5-6) 2 social work interns	Snack Homework Educational activities (literacy related, instructional units, cultural events, recreational trips) Read-aloud or choice time

* PRY is at more sites; two were selected for inclusion in the study.

** One small group workshop is held on Friday—topic is self esteem.

*** Activities varied by age group; younger students had read-aloud time usually before homework, and older students had choice time at the end of the day.

Chapter Three
Assessment Questions, Designs and Findings

This chapter discuss how each program developed its questions and designs, what was found out about each program, and how the process of undertaking the assessment affected the programs. This discussion is preceded by a summary of five aspects of the assessment process that are critical to understanding the findings presented in this chapter.

Critical Aspect of the Assessment Process

First and foremost, the process of conducting the assessment was also a program intervention. As programs asked questions about the relationship between program objectives and activities, they also made adjustments in their programs—sometimes changing their focus or organization. In our discussions of the process, we provide many examples of these mid-course changes and also summarize the longer term changes that programs made and institutionalized.

Secondly, in discussing the various assessment designs, it will be clear that one theme cuts across all of the assessment designs—the theme of decision making and choice. This theme emerged rather late in the workshop series as programs began to share their philosophies and program activities in greater depth. As AED staff reflected on the assessment designs, we hypothesized that the emphasis on decision making reflected a theory held by all the programs of how participants change and what programs needed to do to support change.

This theory of change suggests that, because of the type of schools participants attend and the difficult social and economic circumstances of their lives, they have few opportunities for meaningful choice and decision making. They are rarely asked what they are interested in learning; they have little choice over how activities are designed in school except at recess—one reason school children love recess—or whether or not they want to participate in them; and they have few opportunities in their lives to affect change—for example in their communities.

Each of the programs in various ways placed great importance on providing opportunities for informed decision making and choice, and each of them closely scrutinized their programs for the opportunities that they provided for decision making. In addition, the forms developed for the assessment asked participants to state their reasons for choices—thus the evaluation itself was an intervention that further opened opportunities for reflection on choice.

This theory of change flows from the philosophy on which all the programs were based, as described in chapter two: namely, a belief that young people must be seen as resources and as having valuable contributions to make to any program about how it should be designed and carried out. In addition, this theory reflects the theory of literacy and of community building that all the programs espoused, which involves active participation of all members in building a community within the program—including upholding the norms of behavior. This theory of change also reflects the perspective on literacy as power—the need to involve young people in naming their social realities by learning the vocabulary to describe them and developing the means to communicate what they learn in public forums. (The museum event that was the culmination of What Survives in the Bronx at Pius XII afterschool program—described in the project profile in chapter 2—was an excellent example of a public forum that allowed young people to communicate, in various media and formats, what they had learned about their communities.) Finally, this theme of change reflects an emphasis on active learning, which insists that participants be actively engaged in constructing meaning. This means that young people must understand why they are asked to do something and learn to reflect on why they choose to do something: Why do they select a particular book to read or decide on a particular format for writing or approach to solving problems? Becoming more conscious about such decisions helps young people to be more aware of themselves as learners and hence become more active learners.

Raising the issue of decision making and choice was consciousness raising for staff; it demanded that

they scrutinize participants' and their own use of time and examine program activities for the decision-making opportunities they fostered.

Third, the assessment was carried out during a period of tension in the city over budget cuts for youth services, which affected programs' ability to conduct their assessments. All the programs suffered from the cuts, one so severely that it eventually closed when the project ended. These cuts also undermined the programs' ability to carry out aspects of the evaluation. Two programs lost staff, and one had to use volunteers instead of paid tutors. All the programs had less time for the project because they spent a great deal of time protecting their programs and advocating against the cuts. Nevertheless, programs carried out most aspects of the assessment—even under these conditions—an extraordinary tribute to their interest in and commitment to the project.

Fourth, the original design for this project called for collection and analysis of data from schools on participant achievement, which proved difficult to execute. The difficulties stemmed from two factors. Firstly, the programs drew their participants from many schools—up to 22 different schools, both public and private—making it difficult to collect data and also to have uniform data across schools since schools reported tests scores and grades in different ways and used different tests. Secondly, programs had varying relationships to schools—from no relationship at all in one case to being located in the schools with direct access to records. However, even for the program located in the schools, collecting information on grades was extremely onerous. Program staff had to sift through all school records to identify their participants. The other programs relied on participants bringing in report cards, which was not consistently carried out. As a result the school data is incomplete for all the programs.

Fifth, as the programs developed their own instruments to measure gains in literacy, it became evident that the student outcome data from schools was not informative about the programs' impact on participants' literacy development. Unless the program directly focused on improving particular school outcomes, it was impossible to determine whether or not the program had any impact on changes in school achievement. In addition, changes in school achievement indicators (e.g. test scores) did not necessarily correspond to changes that the program documented in participants' literacy. The latter were directly related to the program activities and were measured by instruments that reflected program activities and objectives. Despite these problems, we have presented whatever school data were collected. They are useful in that they provide a baseline picture of participants' school achievement and also suggest some of the limitations of trying to assess participant progress in afterschool programs through the use of school data.

The Assessment Questions, Designs, and Findings

Friendly Place

Friendly Place was in the process of developing new directions for its afterschool program at the beginning of the project. It had just hired a new education director who was breathing fresh life into a program that had suffered from a lack of direction and considerable staff turnover. Thus the assessment was used as a way to plan and strengthen the program. Discoveries made along the way resulted in program changes or new activities.

The program developed a series of questions that focused on young people's literacy development within the program. It drew on the theoretical literature on literacy suggesting the multiplicity of literacy practices and purposes and asked which ones were being developed in the program and whether program activities supported literacy development in general.

Friendly Place
Assessment Questions

- What are the types, ranges, and levels of proficiency of literacy practices engaged in by children in the after school program? How do literacy practices change over time in response to:
  - the activities offered by the program
  - the choices made by the child
- How do the literacy practices of individual children develop over time, as perceived by program staff, parents and children?
- Does the program design support the program objectives?
  - What types of activities are carried out?
  - How do children perceive the program?
  - How do staff use their time?
  - Does the staff learn form the assessment of children's practices and plan accordingly?

The Assessment Design

In order to address these questions, staff at Friendly Place decided to have participants document how they were using their time in the program—what were they were actually doing when they were supposed to be doing homework and what they chose to do in choice time. Staff were also asked to document their use of time to see how they used it—in planning and supporting participants in completing homework and other activities—and whether their perceptions and those of the participants about the use of time coincided.

In order to assess participants' proficiency in reading, writing and mathematics, staff developed instruments to measure many different aspects of these skills. For example, in reading, the education director used an adaptation of the Primary Language Record* to determine whether or not participants were beginning, moderately skilled or fluent readers. She sat with individual participants as they read books of increasing complexity until they reached one they had difficulty with. As they read, participants were assessed on their reading strategies and comprehension. Originally, the director planned to administer the same assessments at the end of the program, but, because of the loss of a staff member resulting from the budget cuts, she was not able to do.

In order to assess literacy practices and their development, staff asked participants to complete a log every time they read a book for a week in October 1994 and a week in May 1995. These logs were assessed for evidence of the following: participants' being able to state reasons for the type of books chosen; participants' sharing their books with others by discussing and recommending them; and greater complexity in participants' writing about the books they read.

* The record is a written assessment of a child's development in reading and writing which requires ongoing, close observation of children over time.

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Findings

Findings from this program regarding participants' literacy development were positive. Staff found the following from an analysis of the data collected:

- **Use of homework and choice time**: Approximately 70 percent of participants said they had homework and, depending on the day, between one-quarter and one-half completed it during the program; the majority were given worksheets for homework; a high percentage were also given writing. During choice time, most participants chose to read or play games. Teachers' documentation of how they spent time corresponded well with participants' description of how they spent time.

- **Literacy development**: An analysis of 38 reading logs from October and May (20 participants completed logs in October, 18 in May, and 12 in both months) showed that the 38 participants for whom there were completed logs read 86 books; 69 percent read these books with other participants—that is, they wrote to another participant about the book; the rest tended to read books alone.

  Participants demonstrated definite preferences in their reading, as illustrated in the quotes below.

  > "I chose (*Chickens' Aren't the Only Ones*) because it is animal-rific. I like the pictures and it tells about chickens and other animals that lay eggs." (third-grade boy)

  > "I chose (*Mighty Babe Ruth*) because Babe Ruth was one of my favorite players and (child's name) told me that it was a good book. I liked the book because it talks about Babe Ruth and it talked about the record he had broken." (fourth-grade boy)

- Of the 12 participants who completed logs for two months, one-fourth chose more complex books as the year progressed; one-third selected books recommended by others; and one-half increased in their ability to explain why they liked or disliked a book; two-thirds increased in the complexity of what they wrote (they wrote more and gave more details about the books). The quotes below illustrate these changes.

  > *October*
  >
  > "I chose this book (comic book-no title given) because it is a comic book. I liked the pictures. I hate nothing." (third-grade boy)
  >
  > *May*
  >
  > "I chose (*Numidian Force: Quest of the Payland*) because it had action. I liked the book because they were superheroes. I hated it because two characters had different clothes." (third-grade boy)
  >
  > *October*
  >
  > "I chose this book (*New at the Zoo*) because it is a matching book. I liked it because it was funny. I hated it because it was for babies." (fourth-grade boy).
  >
  > *May*
  >
  > "I chose (*Numidian Force, The Isle of Trampling*) because its a comic book. I liked it because the book made sense and it was exciting. I hated the fact that we got mixed up on who was the karate guy." (fourth-grade boy)

- There was **a lack of correspondence between school standardized test scores and the ratings that the director made of participants' proficiency in reading**. For example, of the 14 participants who had both scores, four participants were beginning readers but two of

them scored above grade level in their standardized tests and two scored below. Twelve participants were rated as fluent readers in the program assessment; seven scored above grade level and five below on standardized tests.

- **There was little change in standardized test scores across a year testing cycle.** Of the 25 participants for whom both reading and math scores were available, 52 percent were above grade level in reading and 56 percent in math at the beginning of the year; for the 21 participants for whom scores were available at the end of the year, the pattern remained the same with regard to being above or below grade level; however, four participants improved slightly in reading and five participants improved slightly in math.

Interfaith Neighbors

Interfaith pursued two issues in its assessment of the Challenge Program. The first issue focused on the kinds of challenges participants undertook that were related to literacy development (for example, keeping a journal, visiting the library regularly), social development (relationships with adults and peers, conflict management, working with others in a group), and leadership development (leading discussions, expressing one's opinion in a group). The second issue was proposed by the executive director, who was interested in how case managers used their case-management sessions. Her concern was that the sessions be used primarily to help young people address issues that emerged in the program itself—their attendance, participation in activities, relationships with others—rather than as psychotherapeutic sessions that dealt with family and personal issues outside the program.

Interfaith Neighbors Assessment Questions

- What are the types of challenges (e.g., literacy-related, academic, social, physical, leadership) that youth take on in the program?
- How do the challenges change over time?
- How does the program support participants' undertaking challenges?
- Do agency case managers make interventions focused on enabling the child to adapt to the program and to take advantage fully of group learning activities?

Assessment Design

In order to explore the questions relating to the first issue, the staff designed and pilot-tested pre- and post-surveys regarding challenges undertaken by participants. Separate surveys were developed for participants, staff and parents. Staff and parents were asked to rate each participant on the same issues. The surveys were pilot-tested during the summer Challenge Program, a six-week summer camp. Based on the responses to the questions, the surveys were revised and administered as pre- and post-surveys at the beginning and end of the 1994-95 program year. AED analyzed the surveys to document change over time: that is, each individual was compared to her/himself at the beginning of the program; change was measured by the percentage of participants who went in positive or negative directions or stayed the same. Questions were both close and open-ended; open-ended questions were coded and analyzed for change over time.

The second issue was also addressed through a survey, which the executive director developed with AED staff. She asked her staff to complete the survey three times during the year and used the surveys as the basis for discussions about case-management sessions. Findings from this part of the assessment

project were used internally for staff development purposes.

Findings

- **Social development**: The major findings from the surveys were that the program had the greatest impact on participants' social skills—participants, parents and staff concurred in this perception.
  - ***Participants***: The area of greatest change that participants identified (40 percent saw this as an area of change) was that they were able to express their opinion in a group even if it went against the opinion of the majority.
  - ***Staff***: Staff concurred in this perspective and added additional skills, including the ability to resolve problems with other participants, to talk about oneself in a group, and to express a point of view to an adult.
  - ***Parents***: Parents concurred that the greatest change in their children occurred in social and communication skills; they were better able to resolve problems, listen to others, work in groups, and take into account others' perspective. They felt that their children were more mature, confident, and outgoing.
- **Literacy development**: The surveys also revealed changes in literacy practices and skills although the percentages of participants who changed positively in these areas were lower than the percentages who made the social changes noted above.
  - ***Participants***: 52 percent of participants felt that the program had some or great impact in helping them improve their reading skills; 48 percent felt similarly about their writing. In reading, 25 percent of participants indicated that they were reading more short stories, advertisements and magazines. Smaller percentages indicated many other types of reading that they had increased; 14 percent indicated that they liked to read and write more than before they entered the program.
  - ***Staff***: Staff rated participants' literacy changes as lower: they said 26 percent of participants improved in their writing and 5 percent improved their reading. They also said that 32 percent improved their spelling; 19 percent improved in their ability to look up materials in reference books; 10 percent were more likely to read on their own.
  - ***Parents***: Parents concurred with staff that the greatest changes in their children occurred in their social development, but 73 percent noted areas of academic improvement (writing, reading, spelling, critical thinking skills, greater focus, better grades in school).

Pius XII

Pius staff came to the AED workshops with a clear sense of what they wanted to evaluate. They felt that since their participants were recommended to the program because they were behind in school, they came to the program with negative images of themselves as learners and with negative feelings about the program itself. Staff wanted to assess whether or not their program could change these negative perceptions. Thus they asked whether the program could affect children's perception of themselves as competent learners, decision makers and active members of a community. As staff discussed these ideas in the workshops and with AED staff, they listed indicators of change in these areas. Increasingly, they came to believe that their assessment goal was too ambitious and that the most important area for them to investigate was decision making because it was an area that they could influence and measure. This was also an area that fit with the program goal of helping young people become "individuals who take action" rather than "individuals to whom things are done."

Pius XII
Assessment Questions

- How does the tutoring program encourage decision making in youth?
- What training and support are available for staff with regard to encouraging decision making in youth?
- What changes are observed in participants over time?
- Are program behaviors (decision making) carried over to school?

Assessment design

More than any other program, Pius debated the questions for the evaluation and also used the process of developing the design as a staff development opportunity. For example, in focusing the evaluation on decision making, staff came up with a comprehensive list of 19 areas in which participants could make decisions. Developing the list increased the consciousness of staff about decision-making opportunities. As a result of the discussions, the director said, "Decision making was constantly under discussion—it worked its way into people's thinking and they could articulate this." Staff also developed instruments that increased the amount of reflection that went on among staff and participants about decisions. These instruments included dialogue journals that staff maintained and shared with the director; dialogue journals maintained by tutors and shared with group leaders; and monthly evaluation forms kept by participants about what they had learned and what they wanted to learn; and participant reading logs. Because of the impact of budget cuts on the program, the program lost its tutors. These were replaced by volunteers who had to be trained; because of these new responsibilities, the director was backlogged in responding to staff journals and was forced to discontinue them. However the participants' reading logs and monthly evaluation forms were maintained. In addition to these evaluation activities, Pius XII also developed and administered a parent survey to find out the kinds of literacy activities participants engaged in at home and the kinds of literacy activities that parents engaged in.

Findings

- **Literacy development**: 25 participants' reading logs and monthly evaluation forms were analyzed.
  - They revealed that participants completed goals in reading (they set targets for themselves in reading at the beginning of the year which they were able to accomplish).
  - Their logs revealed that they were writing more.
  - Three-fourths of the participants who wrote nothing at the beginning of the year had entries in March regarding their strengths and what they hoped to improve.
  - The focus of participant writing changed over time. In the beginning they wrote very generally about their likes and dislikes, but by March their writing reflected specific interests that they developed in the program through working on the ecology project, What Survives in the Bronx.
- **Parents' role in literacy development**: The survey helped to dispel the myth that parents of poor children do not provide and support opportunities to read.
  - The parent survey revealed that most of the 30 responding parents said their children read at home but the reading was primarily school-related (worksheets and textbooks).

- Their children had a special place to read, but not a fixed time.
- Their children asked for help with their homework if they needed it.
- Most parents read to their children although very few read daily.
- Parents themselves liked to read and had many other literacy-related interests.
- The survey also provided information that could be used to promote other literacy practices at home—for example, reading for pleasure at regular times.

Project Reach Youth (PRY)

PRY staff focused on two areas of its Family Learning Center program: the impact of homework time on participants' ability to do homework and on their school performance, and the impact of the thematic units on participants' knowledge and skill development.

The first theme resulted from the staff's ambivalence about the role of homework in their program. They were not certain how useful the time spent in doing homework was to participants; what teachers' expectations were; and whether or not parents felt that the homework part of the program was useful. To address the latter question, early on in the project, the staff conducted a focus group with parents. The parents felt that having their children do homework in the program was very important. Parents noted that even the youngest children had quite a bit of homework and that their children had difficulty prioritizing tasks in homework. The second theme emerged from the directors' desire to document the types of instructional approaches used in the program and to promote staff assessments of the effectiveness of these approaches.

PRY
Assessment Questions

- How does the program affect participants' ability to do homework? Do participants become more independent in doing homework?
- How effective is the program in teaching participants through thematic units?

Assessment Design

Based on the parent focus group, PRY staff designed a log that participants completed every day over a four-week period regarding the subjects in which they had homework, the assignments they had, which ones they completed, and what they chose to do in choice time. The staff also designed a survey that they conducted with 10 teachers—five each from the two participating elementary schools—regarding their expectations in assigning homework (how much was assigned, in what subjects, for what purposes); why participants failed to complete homework; and how effective they felt homework was for participants' learning. Staff also wanted to know if improvement in homework grades was correlated with improvement in academic grades. To carry out this aspect of the study, they collected grades for participants from two marking periods.

The second part of the assessment focused on the impact of thematic teaching on participants' learning. Program staff were asked to complete Instructional Record Forms in which they described what they were teaching during a two-month unit on city life. They described the activities they carried out, the instructional approaches they used, what went well and what difficulties they had, and what they noticed about participant learning during the unit.

Findings

- **Classroom teachers' views of homework**: Staff found that the 10 teachers thought homework was important and effective in improving participants' learning. In both schools, teachers had very similar expectations regarding homework—the amount they assigned, the number of subjects, the purposes of homework, and the reasons they gave for why participants did not do their homework. Teachers gave virtually the same ratings to the following purposes for homework: review, foster positive work habits, and foster independent learning. They also claimed that 75 percent of participants completed homework; the main reasons for not completing homework were participants' home situations, and student laziness and lack of self-discipline.

- **Participants' self-report on homework**: Many assignments described by participants emphasized rote learning—completing a worksheet or writing a list of spelling words three times. Very seldom were participants asked to do homework that demanded thought beyond what had been already covered in class. Most participants completed their math homework in the program. Even when other subjects were assigned, this was the one area chosen most frequently.

- **Relationship between homework grades and grades in academic subjects**: 42 percent of participants in the program improved their school homework grades; 46 percent stayed the same; and 12 percent decreased. Of those who improved, 83 percent also improved their grades in core subjects; of those who stayed the same, 65 percent improved in core subjects; of those who decreased, 62 percent increased their grades in core subjects.

- **Learning in thematic units**: Teachers revealed that the thematic units were multidisciplinary, involving math, reading, and writing skills, and focusing on geography, multicultural, and social issues. For example, among the activities in the thematic unit were:

  - Learning about city workers
  - Practicing math skills and using word problems that involved city life
  - Writing poems about the city and developing monologues of city life
  - Writing and performing skits about city life
  - Identifying the five boroughs on a map and favorite places participants had visited
  - Learning about cultural diversity by sampling various ethnic foods
  - Listening to urban stories of various ethnic groups and reading about these groups
  - Discussing city problems and ways to solve them

- **Skill Development**: Teachers identified the following areas of participant development as a result of these activities:

  - Improved ability to work in groups
  - Greater comfort with writing
  - Improved ability to present work to others through various media
  - Learning how to comment on the work of other participants

Lessons Learned

In a review of the main lessons learned from the evaluation, program staff spoke enthusiastically about the process as well as about the findings. Their remarks emphasized the following lessons:

1. The assessment findings validated many aspects of what the programs were doing. The findings provided evidence that young people were indeed reading and writing more and reading more complex material over the course of the program and that they were making decisions, undertaking challenges and accomplishing something in the periods of time devoted to homework and choice time. This validation gave staff courage to face what one described as the "gorilla on our backs"—namely the expectation of their boards and foundations that their work would result in improvements in participants' standardized test scores or grades. **The programs felt that they needed to have, and indeed were developing, alternative ways to measure and demonstrate participant learning**.

2. The assessment process helped programs to clarify their objectives and think about whether their program activities supported these objectives. Certainly the discussions about choice and decision making helped program staff clarify conceptually complex outcomes—such as empowerment—and be more specific about what types of behaviors and attitudes they wanted to promote in their programs that would foster these outcomes.

The assessment process gave staff a common language to talk about key aspects of their programs. For example, in developing surveys for the Challenge Program, Interfaith staff had to clarify what they meant by challenges, what type of challenges existed in their programs, and how they supported children in meeting these challenges. Similarly, the discussions around homework raised interesting questions for PRY staff about the purposes of homework and the possibilities of dialogue between classroom and afterschool teachers about homework and its relationship to learning.

3. The assessment project opened new ways of thinking about and documenting outcomes—for example, documenting proficiency in reading and writing through student logs. The assessment process helped staff become proficient in developing new forms to document important outcomes. These forms included reading logs, monthly evaluations, homework logs, staff journals, pre- and post-tests of reading, writing and math assessment instruments, and parent surveys. These forms will be retained and used in the future to assist in program planning and development.*

4. The assessment provided insight into what program staff needed to focus on in planning program improvements and helped them act in response to the findings. Several programs modified their schedules and made programmatic decisions while in the process of conducting the evaluation. One program changed the schedule to provide more time for community building; another concluded that 45 minutes was sufficient for homework; another that participants needed more opportunities for choice. Staff in one program decided that their focus was still too rooted in a social work perspective focusing on psychosocial problems and that they needed to shift to a focus on the young person as learner and to continue to reorient their case management even more than they had to this perspective.

5. What programs learned about the assessment process made them more knowledgeable in discussions with board members, foundations, and other funders about outcomes and how to document them.

6. Staff realized that in order to have the kinds of important discussions required for an assessment, they needed time and resources. As a result, they felt it was important to build time into future proposals to foundations, including time for part-time staff to participate in the assessment process.

* The development and use of the instruments helped staff enhance and rely on their observational skills and translate observations into systematically organized data about outcomes—i.e., the programs moved from recording anecdotes to reporting results.

Chapter Four
Recommendations for Participatory Assessment Projects and for Developing Effective Afterschool Programs

Recommendations

In assessing the effectiveness of the participatory assessment project, AED used the following indicators of effectiveness:

- Continuity in staff participation and commitment to carrying out the assessment tasks
- Commitment to using the findings from the assessment in improving the program
- Institutionalization of approaches to assessment as evidenced by use of documentation instruments and involvement of other staff in the assessment process
- Using what was learned in communicating with program constituencies

All the programs in the assessment project made the kinds of commitments and followed through in the ways described above. AED believes the following five aspects of the project contributed to its effectiveness: program selection; ownership of the assessment process; networking among programs; technical assistance; and the multi-stage process. These are described briefly below.

*1. **Program selection***. Careful program selection is very important to ensure that programs have the capacity to carry out the project. Through the selection process, AED was able to assess program commitment to the project and capacity to carry it out; programs in turn were able to assess whether or not the time that the project demanded would be worthwhile. The criteria that AED used in program selection included:

- **Commitment of staff** to participate in all phases of the project
- **Participation of staff who are in leadership positions** in which they would be able to apply what they learned in the project in their programs
- **Sufficient organizational stability** so that staff could participate in a two-year project, carry out assessment tasks in addition to their normal work load, and share their learning with others
- Already **existing organizational support** as well as structures for staff development and inquiry that could be used to discuss assessment activities and findings

*2. **Ownership of the assessment process***. It is essential that programs develop ownership of the assessment process through developing questions that are important to them; developing their own designs that reflect program objectives and activities; carrying out the data collection and analysis when feasible; and reviewing and critiquing any materials written on their programs. Once programs participating in the assessment project learned something about the purposes and types of evaluation and about the kinds of questions that could be addressed, they developed their own questions. This process involved reporting on what they had learned in workshops to other program staff; reviewing their objectives; and discussing aspects of their programs—such as the use of time and case management—the effectiveness of which they questioned. Staff were willing to ask questions of consequence to their programs because they felt that the assessment findings would not be used against them—as the findings from non-participatory or monitoring types of evaluations often are.

This sense of ownership was further enhanced when programs developed documentation forms and other assessment instruments that they continued to use after the project ended. These instruments provided data on program participants and parents; how staff carry out their jobs; the nature and intensity of activities that young people engage in; and the impact of various literacy activities on young people's skills.

3. Networking among programs. This occurred through the workshops which provided participants with valuable information gained from listening to their colleagues and validated their efforts by demonstrating commonalities in approaches and obstacles. During the course of the project, networking became one of the most important factors in sustaining program interest in the assessment. Although at first reluctant to share beyond the level of "show and tell," after a relatively short period of time, program staff were able to trust their colleagues and to share program strategies, problems, and assessment instruments freely. This was remarkable since the project took place in a period of declining resources for afterschool programs.

4. Technical assistance. AED's role in the project was critical both in terms of providing technical assistance to programs in the areas in which they lacked expertise: developing and refining assessment questions; developing documentation forms; and collecting, entering and summarizing data. AED also affirmed the collaborative nature of the project by modeling collaborative, participatory methods in the workshops where everyone was both learner and expert; by respecting programs' priorities—for example, during the budget crises, understanding the priority of serving young people rather than participating in the project; and by viewing program input into all phases of the project as essential.

5. Multi-stage process. Having several distinct phases in the project was important to maintaining momentum and sustaining interest. The phases included:

- Learning about evaluation and evaluation strategies
- Developing questions and an assessment design
- Communicating the design to other programs, which provided important validation for the programs and also provided a deadline for completion of this phase of the project
- Data collection and analysis
- Participating in analyzing findings and reviewing written materials on the project
- Reflecting on findings and making adjustments in response

Esential Elements of Youth-Serving Programs with a Focus on Literacy

As indicated throughout this report, the afterschool programs that participated in the assessment project were strong programs. In many ways, these programs are models of what good youth-serving programs should be. The following section discusses eight important elements that should characterize effective youth-serving programs: a philosophy of literacy and youth development; effective leadership; staff commitment; an "un-school-like" environment; a sense of community; ongoing staff development; the involvement of parents; and effective relationships with the schools. (Seven of these elements characterized the afterschool programs that participated in the assessment project to some degree; the eighth did not although it would certainly enhance their effectiveness—and that of youth-serving programs in general.)

1. A philosophy of literacy and youth development. To be effective programs need a philosophy of literacy and youth development that provides a framework and guide for developing activities. All the programs espoused a philosophy of youth and literacy development and a pedagogy that emphasized teaching for meaning and active participation of the learner in constructing meaning. Although the specific activities in each program were different, there were broad similarities in philosophy. Central to their perspective was a view of young people as resources to be developed, not as problems to be fixed. This perspective informed the programs' views of, and created an emphasis on, learner strengths and on providing possibilities for learning arising from what participants already knew and wanted to do.

Having a strong philosophical orientation is essential in afterschool programs because, without it, there is no basis for staff or program development. Without a philosophical basis, a program is in danger

of becoming a baby-sitting service in which individual staff members develop activities reflecting their own experiences or background rather than a coherent program grounded in best practices.

*2. **Effective leadership***. Programs require effective leadership that espouses and articulates the guiding philosophy and principles; that provides opportunities for staff development, including ongoing participation in program planning and development and a supportive, collaborative atmosphere in which to work; and that is responsive to the parents of participants. Additional leadership skills include accessing resources and collaborating with other agencies and community members in strengthening communities.

*3. **Staff commitment***. Programs require staff who are committed to young people, their families and the communities from which they come. Staff in afterschool programs are often paid low salaries and therefore their greatest rewards come from the knowledge and satisfaction that they are able to positively influence young people's development. They must have respect for and knowledge of young people's families and communities in order to understand their lives and to build on their strengths.

*4. **An un-school-like environment***. Programs must consciously develop environments that are not school-like in order to provide young people with alternative routes to learning without the negative connotations that many participants associate with school. All the programs recognized the need to provide learning activities that provided opportunities for young people to develop their minds in many directions and to experience themselves as competent, active learners. These activities, while often not directly related to improved school performance, developed young people's sense of themselves, helped them find their "voice," and strengthened their ability to articulate their knowledge and opinions in writing and other formats.

*5. **A sense of community***. Programs must consciously build a community based on respect, trust and support. The programs' ideas for community building came from their understanding of literacy as well as from a recognition of the importance of trust and group support in youth development. They promoted literacy development by having students share their ideas, books, writing, and art work with their peers as well as the larger community. They emphasized the idea that people communicate best when they trust the people to whom they are communicating and when they see that what they communicate is valued. The programs also promoted youth leadership through encouraging choice, decision making, and young people's participation in the development and maintenance of group norms of respect and support. The sense of community that existed within programs was enhanced by the collaboration among staff involved in assessing participant needs and progress.

*6. **Ongoing staff development***. Staff development in both youth development and literacy must be ongoing. Not all the programs hired staff of comparable sophistication or experience. For example, one program used college tutors, while others hired experienced teachers, social workers and youth workers. In spite of these differences in staff backgrounds, all the programs were committed to having staff engage in ongoing learning experiences through program planning, reviewing the development of individual participants, and, when possible, providing opportunities for staff to learn new skills. The project itself deepened the discourse by demanding that staff scrutinize their own practices more closely and by providing them with opportunities to assess whether or not program activities reflected program goals and objectives.

*7. **Parent involvement***. Programs need to consult parents about their children's development as well as about the impact of the program on them. All the programs involved parents in assessing the program as well as in discussions of their children's development. The project increased the involvement of parents in program assessment by conducting parent surveys and focus groups, through which programs learned how parents assessed the programs' impact on their children's literacy and social development; what their expectations were of the program—for example the

importance attached to doing homework; and how parents perceived the literacy activities that their children engaged in at home. The project developed the capacity and interest of programs in further involving parents in the assessment of their programs.

*8. **Relationships with schools**.* Programs and schools need to develop relationships with one another focusing on addressing the developmental needs of the young people. All but one program in the assessment project had some relationship with the sending schools. Nevertheless, none of the relationships was ideal in that none of them focused on developing a holistic perspective on the learning and developmental needs of the young people in the program. This was not the fault of either the programs or the schools, neither of which had been asked to develop collaborative relationships or given the resources to do so. One program attempted to bridge the gap between program and school through its study of homework and interviews with teachers about their expectations. In general, the relationships between the afterschool programs and schools were characterized by a lack of communication and sometimes hostility. Program staff felt that often teachers did not serve young people well with the result that young people came to them damaged by their experiences in school; and some teachers lacked respect for the services provided by afterschool programs, seeing them primarily as baby-sitting services or homework helpers. This communication gap needs to be bridged so that a holistic perspective on young people and mutual respect for the vital role that both schools and community-based, youth-serving programs play in the education of youth can develop. While requiring additional time and resources, improved communications between school and community programs would help each meet the needs of youth more effectively.

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